

INTERVIEW WITH KEITH HARRINGTON
NOVEMBER 17, 2004 BY ROGER KAYE

MR. KAYE: This is a telephonic interview with Keith Harrington who now lives in Wisconsin. It's conducted by Roger Kaye here in Fairbanks on November 17, 2004. The subject of today's talk is Keith's involvement in the Murie Sheenjek expedition of 1956. It is also about his flying for them and his other flying out of Fort Yukon in the 1950's. Keith, thank you for being willing to talk to me about this today. I'd like to begin with what brought you to Alaska in the first place and where did you come from?

MR. HARRINGTON: Well, I'd have to say that Harry Truman was probably responsible for me coming to Alaska. I was flying out of Ely, Minnesota to the fishing resorts in that area. I had been doing this for a year or more when President Truman issued a Presidential Order. We understood that a Presidential Order is only good if it holds up in court. So we proceeded to fly, and fight the case. We lost in a Federal Court in Duluth. And we lost in a Federal Court of Appeals in St. Louis.

MR. KAYE: Now this was the ruling that there wouldn't be any over flights under a certain altitude over the Superior National Forest is that right?

MR. HARRINGTON: We weren't allowed to fly beneath 4,000 feet and most every area that we serviced was in the Superior National Forest. This effectively put us out of business and put the resorts out of business. Of course, after a certain period of time after that I just decided that I had to make the decision to either go back to flying somewhere or stay where I was doing a different kind of work. I decided to go back to flying and I thought what better place than Alaska. That's where there is a lot of flying. So I wrote letters. I wrote to Chambers of Commerce and got addresses of the various flying services. I wrote to them and was offered two jobs. One of them was in Fairbanks and one in Ketchikan, Alaska. I took the one in Fairbanks and spent the summer there. Then got on with Ween that eventually led me to the station in Fort Yukon.

MR. KAYE: So what was your job in Fort Yukon? Were you the local Ween pilot?

MR. HARRINGTON: I was the local Ween pilot. I flew mail, freight, and passengers and there was also charter work involved. It was more than a full-time job, even in the wintertime. I was getting over 100 hours a month. In the summer it was considerable more.

MR. KAYE: What kind of flying were you doing?

MR. HARRINGTON: In the summer it was wheels and floats. In the winter it was ski-equipped aircraft for the most part. I had schedules up and down the river at places like

Beaver, and Stephens, and Arctic Village and up towards the Brooks Range. It was just a lot of flying.

MR. KAYE: Did you do a lot of bush flying, like flying trappers out and so on?

MR. HARRINGTON: Yeah, there was some of that. There were trappers who flew out and just about anything that you can imagine I guess, would be what we did. But the bulk of it was the scheduled flying.

MR. KAYE: What kind of planes were you flying up there?

MR. HARRINGTON: Primarily I had a Cessna 180. I also at times had a Cessna 185, which was a little bigger. I usually had a Norseman, sometimes on floats, sometimes on wheels. In the wintertime I had it on skis of course. I usually had two or three airplanes there.

MR. KAYE: I noticed in pictures and on one of the films that the Muries made; it actually showed you landing in a Cessna 170, I think.

MR. HARRINGTON: That's a possibility. They had a 170 probably. I don't recall a Cessna 170 up there, but they did have an Oranka sedan. I think it was a four place Oranka sedan, which did not have the horsepower of the 180 Cessna and wasn't anywhere near as good. They didn't have it there very much.

MR. KAYE: Tell me about your involvement with the Murie expedition. I understand you did almost all of the flying and support of that.

MR. HARRINGTON: I think I probably did most all of the flying. I don't recall anybody else doing any flying on it. It just came in, pretty much unannounced as far as I was concerned. I didn't know they were coming. I didn't have any information ahead of time to lead me to believe that this would be any different from just a charter trip up there and back. But it turned out that I was servicing them on a pretty regular basis after I got them in there. I'd probably stop in there, at least on a weekly basis. Sometimes it was a regular schedule out of Fort Yukon. Sometimes I would drop over from Arctic Village, which wasn't too far away. I'd take care of whatever their needs might be at that time.

MR. KAYE: So on the first flight, you flew them onto the ice at Lobo Lake didn't you?

MR. HARRINGTON: I believe I landed on wheels because we hadn't put on the floats I don't suppose yet. I landed a wheel-equipped airplane on the ice at Lobo, yes.

MR. KAYE: And you were the one who moved them up from there to Last Lake didn't you?

MR. HARRINGTON: Yes, I was the one that moved them up to Last Lake. They named Lobo after we got there and then they named Last Lake after we got there because it was the last lake in the valley that I could land on.

MR. KAYE: I see.

MR. HARRINGTON: I suppose these were unnamed lakes prior to that.

MR. KAYE: I think you also flew some of the villages in from over in Arctic Village for visits didn't you?

MR. HARRINGTON: Some of the time I would be going to from Arctic Village back to Fort Yukon. I would go out of my way to go up there to take care of their needs or to see what they might want. The way we worked it was just to charge the regular rate for the mail run up and back the charter would be just the extra, tacked on to that. This made it a little cheaper for them to get the service. Sometimes I would have people coming from Arctic Village back to Fort Yukon and they would be riding through there with me.

MR. KAYE: What was your own impression of what the Muries and that group people were up there for?

MR. HARRINGTON: When I first took them up there, and I guess all during the summer of 1956 when I serviced them, I really didn't know; other than that they were gathering information about the flora and fauna of the area. I didn't know that they were planning to instrumental in creating what eventually became the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I learned that afterwards and I could tell that was where that came from. They didn't talk to me about that specifically.

MR. KAYE: I see. In Mardy's book, *To the Far North* she references a discussion they had that you were involved in regarding the question of airplane use in that area. She mentioned that you had been instrumental in that issue in the boundary waters canoe area. She mentioned that you had some thoughts on the use of planes. And secondly that you discussed whether the area should be available just for use of airplanes in natural areas or whether there should be developed airstrips. Do you remember that discussion?

MR. HARRINGTON: I don't recall much about that discussion. But I felt about the area that I flew and of course I was directly involved there and it cost me my job when they got rid of the airplane. But there was a strong possibility that the defendants in the case; some of the resort owners and the head of the flying service that I worked for in Ely, Minnesota had been willing to compromise; they could have come up with a compromise deal whereby we would not fly to so called 'outside lakes' where there were no cabins suitable for human habitation. We'd fly only to the established resorts. But nobody wanted to do that. They didn't want to compromise. Their statement was, "We'll win it

all, or we'll lose it, on the merits". So we lost it. But there was nothing like that in the area that was set up in ANWR. There wasn't any place at all; no village or anything like that in the area.

MR. KAYE: Do you feel that the area should have been left open for landing airplanes in natural areas rather than establishing airports? Or do you think some airstrips should have been developed?

MR. HARRINGTON: I don't see any reason why it should have been open for building airports or anything like that. I think that it being left entirely as it is was probably an excellent idea. And I am definitely opposed to the drilling for oil in ANWR. I know that that's up on the North Slope just a little bit up from where we were; the same thing applies.

MR. KAYE: You were telling me a little while ago that you flew Justice Douglas from Fort Yukon to the area and had a discussion about the airplane use with him, didn't you?

MR. HARRINGTON: Yes, I did. I remember Justice Douglas going up and on the way back I had a chance to ask him about the situation in Ely. I asked him if he remembered the "air ban" case that we brought to the U.S. Supreme Court. He said that he did remember. I found him to be a very, intelligent and very, very likeable individual. We had a fairly good discussion about that.

MR. KAYE: Tell me your impression of the others, starting with the Muries, Olaus and Mardy. What were the interactions you had with them?

MR. HARRINGTON: They were very, very nice people. And they were at home in the wilderness. There is an interesting quick little story I can remember. When we were getting ready to load them onto in Fort Yukon, the two Indian fellows who were helping to load the airplane remarked about the fact that they had no guns with them, or no weapons at all. They noticed that Olaus was fairly old at that time and they wondered if these guys knew what they were doing. Olaus and his wife of course, did know what they were doing. They were very experienced in that type of situation. They did an excellent job there. The thing that I was concerned about was the fact that there are Grizzly's. That's Grizzly country around the Sheenjek. Almost every time I would fly in there, I'd see Grizzlies within a mile or two of camp. Sometimes as I'd get down low I would notice the Grizzlies running across the tundra and the fat, shaking on their sides. Obviously, they encountered Grizzlies up there a few times also. But they had the idea that if they got upwind of the Grizzly and he could tell it was 'man', he would leave them alone. They did have a couple of encounters I believe that might have been somewhat scary, but they did escape any kind of harm.

MR. KAYE: Do you remember if the natives had any kind of impressions as to what the Muries were doing up there?

MR. HARRINGTON: I don't think that at the time, the natives had any more idea about what they were doing than I did. But I think they would have been one hundred percent in favor of what they were doing. I don't think there was any problem with them.

MR. KAYE: What about George Schauler? You probably knew him from that.

MR. HARRINGTON: George Schauler was a real goer, even at that time. I would estimate that at the time he was in his early twenties. He was the kind of fellow would put a pack on his back and be gone for three days at least, into the mountains. Of course, that was just the start of a great career for him.

MR. KAYE: What about Bob Kreer, did you know him?

MR. HARRINGTON: I knew him, but not too well. I kind of understood that he was the primary photographer for the group. I also understood that he had come through the University of Wisconsin system.

MR. KAYE: And Brina Kessel?

MR. HARRINGTON: Brina was definitely a goer. She was enthusiastic about everything she did. She was at the University of Alaska at the time. She was right there at the forefront, every time I would come in and there was some stuff to unload out of the airplane. She was right there to grab it.

MR. KAYE: Are there any other impressions you have about your interactions with those people up there?

MR. HARRINGTON: Are you talking about the people at the lakes at Sheenjek?

MR. KAYE: Yes.

MR. HARRINGTON: Well, it was a fine group of people. They got along well, and they were very good at what they did, obviously.

MR. KAYE: In the years following, there were several hearings in Fairbanks and quite a bit of controversy over whether the Arctic Range should be established or not. Do you recall that? Did you have any involvement in that, or were in Fort Yukon and kind of way from it at the time?

MR. HARRINGTON: I don't recall the controversy especially. Mardy Murie did contact me later when I was in Anchorage. She was coming up for some kind of a get

together; I'm not sure what it was. She wanted me to go with her and meet some of the Park people; which I did. That situation was pretty well resolved by that time.

MR. KAYE: These are the questions I had. The last one I'll just open up to you. Are there any other thoughts you have about the Arctic Refuge and what became of the work that the Muries and others worked on up there, that you'd like to share?

MR. HARRINGTON: Well, I was once asked not too long ago by someone if I thought they ought to drill for oil in ANWR. My answer of course to that is; no, I don't think they should. That's where I stand on that. Which I think would be in perfect agreement with Olaus or Mardy. It was great country. It was interesting country. It was probably unforgiving country if you happened to get hurt or injured. You had to know what you were doing there. I think those people did, they spent a lot of time in that environment.

MR. KAYE: Did you ever fly any hunters or recreationists up there over the years?

MR. HARRINGTON: Well, that's an interesting question. This was before the Murie party went up there. I was flying for Fairbanks Air Service and I was the floatplane pilot for them. I came in on a wheel ship from the Usabelly coal mine. They said, "Our plane is loaded and ready to go, where are you going?" They pointed to a spot on the map and I took this fellow up there. We landed on a lake near the Sheenjek, but not as far up. I dropped him off at that lake. And to make a long story short, he just disappeared from the face of the earth.

MR. KAYE: Oh really?

MR. HARRINGTON: Yeah. It was over a year later when his mother was trying to contact him. I was still in Fort Yukon. I happened to see a paper that mentioned something about it. I said, "Well that's the fellow I flew up there!" I talked to the Marshall there and they got BLM to come up in the Grumman Goose. I went up with them to show them where I dropped him. We landed at the same place I dropped him off. There was his campsite, just as we had unloaded it. Everything was there that I remembered, such as snowshoes that were still in the wrapping from the store. The three of us spread out. It was about 11pm, but it was daylight. So we spread out and walked toward the river from that point. We figured that was what he would have done. We found a sleeping bag and a rifle leaned up against a tree, but we never found any sight of him. They later went back and made a more thorough search. They never found him. I think he was either dead or in serious trouble within twenty-four hours after I dropped him off. He was a young fellow from about Pittsburgh, PA.

MR. KAYE: Interesting, what year was that?

MR. HARRINGTON: The year I dropped him off was about June of 1955. I suppose it was a year or a year and a half later when I was in Fort Yukon when I happened to see that article and recognize him.

MR. KAYE: Did you take any hunters or other recreationists up to that area of the Sheenjek, or what became ANWR?

MR. HARRINGTON: No, I didn't take anybody else up there. I might have had one or so parties. I really can't be sure. My memory doesn't serve me that well. But I never was back into that particular area after that. I go close to it sometimes, but that into that area.

MR. KAYE: Okay, well Keith, those are the questions that I had. I want to thank you for this interview.

MR. HARRINGTON: Well you are more than welcome.